DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 128 851 CS 202 970

AUTHOR Ohrn, Karin Becker
TITLE Re-Viewing Photographs: Unexplored Resources for Communication Research.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (59th, College Park, Maryland, July 31-August 4, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Information Theory; *Media Research; Nonverbal Communication; Photocomposition; *Photographs; *Photography

ABSTRACT

Photographs, treated as evidence of patterns of communication, can make a so-far neglected contribution to communication research. Specific reference is made to three issues: the kinds of evidence to be found in photographic materials, the assessment of the evidentiary quality of a photograph or group of photographs, and the considerations to be taken into account when analyzing photographs as evidence. Suggestions for appropriate ways of analyzing photographic materials are made in light of the small, but diverse, body of research exploring the roles photographic communication has played, and continues to play, in American society. (Author/AA)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED128851

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Re-Viewing Photographs: Unexplored Resources for Communication Research

Karin Becker Ohrn
School of Journalism, University of Iowa

Increasingly, we see the world around us indirectly, as mediated through photographic images. We are "bombarded" by them, photographer Dorothea Lange said a decade ago; we see photographs "unconsciously, in passing from the corner of our eyes, flashing at us" (1964:19). Because the report of an event often assumes a greater influence than the event itself, photographs--visual reports--increasingly shape our perspectives on the world. This is true not only of the major events of the day, those of which offical "history" is made; photographic reports have shaped our ideas about our past, both our collective history and for each of our private selves. Photographs also influence how we look at and understand others, people we experience only through the camera record--whether they be from so-called "exotic" lands, or from across the tracks in our own town.

Despite the apparent power and influence of photographs as they appear in newspapers and magazines, staring at us from billboards or from our own mantles, few scholars have examined photographic records as communication phenomena, and most research has ignored those images which represent aspects of the chosen area of study. Looking through the annals of communication literature, it becomes apparent that most scholars consider the Word as the imperial carrier of messages.

CS 202 970

This tendency stems from two primary assumptions: one, that photographs, as representations of reality, are neither the result of nor subject to interpretation; and two, that scholars who work in the medium of words are incapable of understanding or analyzing photographic images. It is disturbing to see creative and insightful scholars refusing to consider photographs relevant to their work, out of apparent deference to what they consider the outcome of a complex combination of technical skills. The absence of reflection and research on the role of the photographic image in communication paves the way for the misuse of photographs. Because most people "read" photographs as the lay person "reads" headlines--with only a quick glance for the gist of a story--photography in the mass media is geared toward producing the "grabber," that is the image with a superficial message that is immediately apparent to the viewer. Because the photograph is not awarded the same authorship as most written works, it is usually treated as mere illustration. Since the who, what, when, where, why and how of photographs are of little significance to the lay audience, those responsible for making and publishing the photographic report learn to care less.

The first step in incorporating photographs into communication research requires overcoming habits of simply glancing at images. One must learn to study a photograph "with the care and attention to detail one might give to a difficult scientific paper or a complicated poem," Howard Becker suggests (1974a:7):

> Every part of the photographic image carries some information that contributes to its total statement; the viewer's responsibility is to <u>see</u> in the most literal way, everything that is there and

> respond to it. To put it another way, the statement the image makes--not just what it shows you, but the mood, moral evaluation, and casual connections it suggests--is built up from those details. A proper "reading" of a photograph sees and responds to them consciously.

Becker describes an exercise for developing photographic "reading" habits: Select a good photograph and look at it intently for several minutes, first naming the objects, then telling a story about the people and things in the picture. Careful examination of the photograph and translating it into words serves to heighten the viewer's awareness that he or she was previously not conscious of many elements in the image, and also commits the photograph to memory, just as carefully reading and taking notes on an article will do (Becker 1974a:7).

In adopting this mode of examining photographs, it is essential to suspend the common sense assumption that a photograph is a reality substitute with intrinsic and universal meaning. A photograph can carry considerable denotative material--information about time and place. However, this information cannot be separated from why and how the photograph was made and used (see Sekula 1975). Although the denotative aspects of the image constrain the kinds of interpretations which the image suggests, they do not determine the meaning of the photographs, for photographs are not unmediated copies of the real world. The existence of a photograph is a sign of someone's investment in the sending of a photographic message, as Sekula points out (1975:37), and "if we accept the fundamental premise that information is the outcome of a culturally determined relationship, then we can no longer ascribe an intrinsic or universal meaning to the photographic image."

It is important to ask what you know from looking at the photograph

and what you don't know: is the photograph of a mother and child, or of a woman and child? Was the photograph made in the 1940s, or is it of a couple of nostalgia buffs? Reflecting upon what you <u>think</u> you know provides clues about the kinds of sets we carry around in our heads, and about our tendencies toward mental closure.

Ask yourself what other information about the image can be gained from its context. Where and how is it printed? What words, if any accompany the photograph? Is the photographer identified, and how is the source given, if at all? Often, photographs are presented and even filed in archives with little if any written material, on the apparent cliched assumptions that "photographs speak for themselves" as "mirrors of reality." In many cases, one faces the frustration of knowing the source only as "Laserphoto," and the person who made the image only as "AP," presumably standing for "Anonymous Photographer."

The technical aspects of a photograph which deter many from ever examining photographs, are important only to the extent that they influence our perception of a person or a scene. Long lenses tend to condense or flatten elements in an image, so can create a traffic snarl out of a line of cars or a sense of intimacy between two men photographed from a distance. The use of a wide angle lens expands space and can distort a person's features. Lighting can alter the mood of a scene, and the use of flash can create a theatrical impression or harsh, even foreboding shadows. Long exposure influences the record of motion, usually by blurring it, while a very short shutter speed can stop action we are incapable of seeing without the aid of a camera. In the darkroom, additional factors come into play: a photograph can be printed to minimize or even eliminate aspects of the image which the

printer considers distracting. Sensitivity to the influence of technique can come with practice in looking at photographs and talking to a knowledgeable photographer: extensive knowledge of the technical aspects of photography is unnecessary.

When examining photographs from the past, one must take into account changes in photographic equipment and film emulsion. However, the constraints technology places on the way photographs look has less impact than the social conventions governing how photographs are composed. For example, the formality within the Victorian family was more important in structuring their portraits into stiff representations than was the film used or shutter speed of the old cameras. Halpern (1974:64) points to the few informal, relaxed photographs that were made as evidence that technological limitations could have been overcome, had the convention of an appropriate portrait been less stiff and if informal representations of family life had been acceptable. On the other hand, the widespread adoption of a technological innovation in photography is a social phenomenon, indicating a shared fascination for the new perspective the camera can reveal.

The activities of making and looking at photographs are communication events involving subjects, photographers, viewers, and the mediating technology. As in any communication act, the meaning of a photographic statement is socially constructed and contextually bound. And, like other communication events, the ways photographs are made, used, and looked at tend to be patterned according to social and cultural conventions. The conventions do not provide an inviolate set of rules, but rather an evolving pattern to which the participants in photographic communication refer in making sense of an image (see Becker 1974b:771).

Different sets of conventions guide different modes of photographic communication: the people engaged in creating a formal portrait relate to each other differently and with different results than the group of people who are making a photographic document of their family together--and each of us would recognize and distinguish between the conventions governing each photographic mode. Bill Owens (1973) stepped out of his role as a newspaper photographer when he assembled photographs of the people of Livermore, California, for his book Suburbia.

Similar variations occur cross-culturally and through time. Examining the film and videotape records of African apostolic religious groups, Jules-Rosette (1975) found that selected church members made visual accounts that were easily distinguishable from those made by Americans filming the same events. In addition to variation in the specific subjects filmed, the two groups of filmmakers employed different behaviors while filming and used different camera techniques, variations which could not be accounted for by the amount of filmmaking experience. Worth and Adair (1972) found that a group of films made by Navajos were structured according to different visual codes than exist in conventional American film. Chalfen (Worth and Adair 1972:228-251) found systematic differences between films made by suburban white and urban black teenagers in Philadelphia. There is no reason to expect that research on the use of still photographs would not reveal similar cultural variations in the conventions employed.

Historical photographs provide an accurate record of the past only to the extent that they reveal the goals and biases of the photographer, the desires of the subject, and the photographic styles of the period.

Scherer (1975) found that official government cameramen photographed American Indians in costumes other than those worn by their tribe, sometimes photographed different Indians in the same clothing, and occasionally made portraits conforming to the 1870s fashion of presenting Indians as exotic, savage, or romantic. In selecting photographs for his book Wisconsin Death Trip, Lesy (1973) dwelled on photographs of the dead as evidence of the morbid world view of the people of a Wisconsin community in the 1890s. In so doing, however, Lesy overlooked the changing conventions of sepulchre photography: a widespread and appropriate ritual event of the past is considered by many people today as a bizarre practice.

Once we recognize and accept that it is impossible to conceive of a photograph as existing in a free state, that every photograph bears meaning only as it is used in relation to some context, we are ready to consider how photographs can contribute to research on human communication. It should be obvious from the studies cited above that the constructed research frame must take into account the context in which the photograph was made and used, including where it was made, where it was published, and what other written or visual material accompanied it. In other words, in order for a research mode of analysis to be valid, it must incorporate the situated meanings associated with the photographs in its other modes of use (see S. Ohrn 1975).

When coupled with appropriate contextual information, photographs can provide valuable insights into what people and places look like. This has been aptly demonstrated by the work of a number of ethnographers who use photography in their field research (see Bateson and Mead 1942;

Collier 1967). In news photographs, behind the famous person, for example, the careful observer may find evidence of the lives of ordinary people and signs of the times. However, photographs can often tell as much about their makers as their subjects. Press photographer Ernest Cole's book, House of Bondage (1967), through the linking of words and photographs shows the quality of life of black South Africans and graphically reveals the perspective of a black South African on his society. When we explore images for insights into their creators, we are entering the area in which analysis of photographs can make a great contribution to communication research, for photographic images suggest how people working in various cultural milieus select, edit, and translate reality into a static visual format.

Photographs can suggest what was considered appropriate for a particular audience and, at least as telling, what was inappropriate. To what extent did appropriateness change from one context, type of publication, perhaps, to another? In the 1930s, the photographs of the dust bowl Life magazine published for its mass audience offered a striking contrast to the way Fortune presented the same topic to its predominantly wealthy readers. What are (and were) the accepted ways of visualizing the society of which the photographer is a member? How does this change when the photographer works in a foreign country? National Geographic photographers tend to vary the ways they use their cameras, according to dominant American stereotypes of the country they are working in. Women of other societies often appear in National Geographic as exotic and alluring, an inappropriate perspective for its photographs of American women. Do different conventions appear to be invoked for different subjects? It used to be an accepted rule that

women were photographed from above and men from below, to accentuate their social positions. Today, a woman involved in a national sex scandal is presented differently in the press than a woman ambassador, and the photographs of each grow out of and in turn reinforce the public attitudes toward them. How photographs are used suggests the editorial stance of a publication. Do photographs seem to be published primarily to convey information, to grab readers' attention, or as design elements, to vary the appearance of the verbal content?

What do photographs made in different societies suggest about the kind of visual record that is valued in each? And what do changes through time suggest about how those values evolve? For my examination of the work of Dorothea Lange, a photographer whose work spanned fifty years, I compared her with other photographers who shared some of her attitudes toward a documentary style (K. Ohrn 1976). Through an analysis of these persons' photographs and accompanying written material, articles they wrote and their correspondence, interviews with people who knew and worked with them, and an examination of the agencies they worked for, I found I could trace changing patterns of documentary photography in the United States and also point to ways that Lange's work was unusual. For example, her dedication to documentary photography as a tool for humanistic social science meant the photographs she made for the Farm Security Administration during the 1930s stood out from her peers' work: in addition to the power of her individual images, she insisted on coupling this visual data with extensive written information on her subjects and she took an instrumental role in grouping her work with that of others for reports which influenced government policy and focused public attention

on the issues related to migrant labor conditions. In contrast, Lange's work showed up poorly in the picture magazines two decades later. Her approach, including her photographic style, was not as well-suited to the short term assignments and illustrative journalism of those editor-dominated magazines. Such comparisons through time and across photographers enable us to develop insights into how photographic conventions are influenced by the changing economic and social factors, by the publications and agencies employing photographers, and by the individual strengths and weaknesses of the photographers themselves. Similar studies could be done for specific types of publications, such as the evolution of the German picture magazines, important precursors to Life and Look in this country, or the recent rise of the corporation annual report as a photographic document. The evolving role of the picture editor or staff photographer could be examined using a similar pattern of inquiry, to suggest how the photographs which shape our perspective on the day's news are made and selected, and the attitudes of the people who are responsible for these tasks.

Photographs can be used in interviews to stir memories and to elicit conceptual categories, a technique being used by growing numbers of ethnographers (see Collier 1967; Feld 1976). I have found group interviews with family photographs especially suited for observing how these images acquire meaning for family members as the photograph collection and the accompanying stories are passed on to younger generations in the context of the interview itself (K. Ohrn 1975). Others who have conducted interviews using photographs drawn from family or "home" collections have found this kind of elicitation reveals patterns concerning how the photographs were made and used (Chalfen

1973, 1975)[1]; and others have found that these patterns can then be used for cross-cultural comparisons. American and Lebanese students each tended to draw on their own cultural experience to interpret aspects of home photographs of informal Lebanese parties (Badre ms). For example, the Americans "saw" the presence of alcohol in the postures of the Lebanese in the photographs; and the Lebanese "saw" people on dates, an interpretation apparently drawn from their American experience, since dating is uncommon in Lebanon.

This type of research has yet to be done on photographs published in the media, an area which offers rich possibilities for cross-cultural comparisons of how photographs distributed world-wide contribute to opinions formed of other people and nations. It is suggestive that a group of Tunisian students were convinced by photographs of Jacqueline Kennedy made at President Kennedy's funeral that she did not love her husband, for she showed nothing that looked to them like grief or mourning (Stehura ms).

Photographs can be used in interview situations to elicit statements for use in additional testing of interpretations of photographs, using Q methodology. Currently such research is underway which may show that lay women and critics interpret the work of Diane Arbus in distinctive ways (Smith, in progress). Another student is using Q methodology to examine to what extent lawyers, people who work on newspapers, and lay readers interpret specific kinds of photographs as invasions of privacy (Kadrmas, in progress). These studies already show promise for elucidating how specific types of people draw on their experiences as they create meaning out of photographic statements.

The research approaches suggested here cannot be adequately accomodated within any method which attempts to provide a way of understanding complex material by reducing it to a number of manageable variables. Research exploring how photographs are structured, used, and how they attain meaning requires an insistence on maintaining the integrity of the material, despite an inability to analyze it in measurable ways. Our methodology should not represent a compromise with the richness of our material. Instead of relying on a methodology to do our analysis for us, we should be honing our sensitivities toward selection and analysis of data which take into account the communication phenomenon in its wholeness. Inasmuch as objectivity and truth are unattainable, even illusory, we should shift our emphasis toward developing sophisticated subjective interpretations of our data.[2] In this endeavor, guidelines are more appropriate than a full-blown methodology.[3] First, one should employ the same standards when using photographs in research as when using written data. Photographs require the same clear, logically presented analysis as verbal text. Second, every effort should be made to acquire and supply specific information about the photographs selected for analysis and presentation. Photographs do not speak for themselves: where and how each photograph was made, by whom, and how it has been used are all essential contextual elements which contribute to accurate interpretation of photographic materials. Third, specify the basis for selecting a particular photograph or group of photographs. Was a photograph selected because it is typical--that is, representative of a body of work--or because it has unique or unusual qualities? Finally, take care to evaluate each photograph in the context of the time and place in which it was made, and enable the reader, your audience, to do the same. Avoid perpetuating the many ways

photographs have been misused by committing the same errors in your own work.

Photographs can offer insights into the structure and content of human communication, for they illustrate how people frame reality when translating it into a static mode for particular purposes. To continue to ignore photographs as resources for communication research in favor of modes of communication which appear more amenable to our understanding and which have established methods of analysis, is to ignore the impact of what we see or how we think. It is to ignore one of the central means by which people form their ideas and memories of themselves and others.

Notes

[1]Several years ago Chalfen began an examination of the pattern and structure of what he calls the "home mode of visual communication." Since then, the Division of Performing Arts at the Smithsonian Institution has collected home movies and photographs, under the direction of Steve Zeitlin and Amy Kotkin, as part of the annual American Folklife Festival. Interviewing people about their collections, Zeitlin and Kotkin have found remarkable repetition of the types of photographs people collect and how they keep and use them. Other research has been done by Chalfen's students in the Anthropology Department at Temple University, and by my students in the School of Journalism, University of Iowa, on various aspects of family photograph collections.

[2]This is a paraphrase of a discussion by Feld (1976:311) of legitimate use of film in ethnographic research. The concept of the "participating camera" as presented by Rouch (1974:41) and De Heusch (1962:21) is applicable to anyone engaged in research on human communication (see also Feld and Williams 1975).

[3]The guidelines presented here are adapted from a comparative review by Stehura (ms) of Wisconsin Death Trip, by Lesy (1973) and The Family Album, by Silber (1973).

Selected Bibliography

Badre, Leila
ms. An Examination of Photographs Cross-Culturally. School of Journalism, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

Bateson, Gregory and Margaret Mead
1942 Balinese Character. New York: New York Academy of Sciences.

Becker, Howard S.
1974a Photography and Sociology. Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication 1(1):3-16.
1974b Art as Collective Action. American Sociological Review 39(6):767-776.

Byers, Paul
1966 Cameras Don't Take Pictures. Columbia University Forum 9(1): 28-32.

Carpenter, Edmund
1973 Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me! New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Chalfen, Richard
1973 Cinema Naivete: A Sociovidistic Approach to the Home-Mode of Visual Communication. Program in Ethnographic Film Newsletter 4(3):7-11.
1975 Introduction to the Study of Non-Professional Photography as Visual Communication. Folklore Forum, Bibliographic and Special Series 13:19-26.

Cole, Ernest
1967 House of Bondage. New York: Random House.

Collier, John Jr.
1967 Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

DeHeusch, Luc
1962 The Cinema and Social Science. Paris: UNESCO.

Feld, Steve
1976 Ethnomusicology and Visual Communication. Ethnomusicology 22(2):293-325.

Feld, Steve and Carroll Williams
1975 Toward a Researchable Film Language. Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication 2(1):25-32.

Halpern, Steven
1974 Souvenirs of Experience: The Victorian Studio Portrait and the Twentieth Century Snapshot, in Jonathan Green, Ed., The Snapshot. Aperture 19(1): 64-67.

Hockings, Paul, Editor
1975 Principles of Visual Anthropology. The Hague: Mouton.

Jules-Rosette, Bennetta
1975 The Marrapodi Films: Informant and Documentary Uses of the Camera. Folklore Forum, Bibliographic and Special Series 13:1-18.

Kadrmas, Kathy
in progress M.A. thesis on photographs published in the press as invasions of privacy, School of Journalism, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

Lange, Dorothea
1964 Interview by Richard K. Doud, May 22. Washington: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Lesy, Michael
1973 Wisconsin Death Trip. New York: Random House.

Ohrn, Karin Becker
1975 The Photoflow of Family Life: A Family's Photograph Collection. Folklore Forum, Bibliographic and Special Series 13:27-36.
1976 A Nobler Thing: Dorothea Lange's Life in Photography. Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Ohrn, Steven
1975 I've Been Duped: Reducing the Home-Mode to Data. Folklore Forum, Bibliographic and Special Series 13:37-44.

Owens, Bill
1973 Suburbia. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books.

Rouch, Jean
1974 The Camera and Man. Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication 1(1):37-44.

Ruby, Jay
1973 Up the Zambezi with Notebook and Camera, or Being an Anthropologist Without Doing Anthropology. Program in Ethnographic Film Newsletter 4(3):12-15.

Scherer, Joanna Cohan
1975 You Can't Believe Your Eyes: Inaccuracies in Photographs of North American Indians. Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication 2(2):67-79.

Sekula, Allan
1975 On the Invention of Photographic Meaning. Art Forum 13(5): 36-45.

Silber, Mark
1973 The Family Album. Boston: David R. Godine.

Smith, Cindy Zoe
in progress M.A. thesis on perceptions of the work of Diane Arbus, School of Journalism, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

Stehura, Linda
ms. Comparative review of Wisconsin Death Trip and The Family Album.

Worth, Sol and John Adair
1972 Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Worth, Sol and Larry Gross
1974 Symbolic Strategies. Journal of Communication 24(4):27-39.